

Baptism in the Great Commission



PART 3 OF 3

Trust Statement: **Baptism is both symbol and sacrament.**

Scripture Reading: [Romans 6:3-5](#); [Colossians 2:12](#); [Acts 22:16](#)^[1]

Is baptism a symbol? Is baptism a sacrament? Is it both? Since neither word (symbol or sacrament) is employed in the New Testament writings with baptism, then these words are accommodative nomenclatures to express truths contained in baptism. It appears, so it seems to this author, that baptism is a symbol of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, it also appears that remission of sins is associated in some sense with baptism^[2] This author has chosen these two words -- symbol and sacrament -- to try to capture the essence of baptism in the Christian age.

Is baptism something necessary for salvation? Frequently, one interprets baptism within the framework of one's own experience. A good example involves the various explanations attached to the numerous Scriptures dealing with baptism. A common tendency is to read into the text one's own preconceived prejudices. It appears that one such conclusion is that baptism is not correct if one does not understand the precise moment God remits sin(s) in the life of the believer. If baptism is not performed specifically "for the remission of sins," then baptism is invalid, according to many.

Numerous attempts have been made to reconcile baptism with justification by faith. Another crucial question is: What relationship does water baptism have with faith? Again, one must inquire about the "act" of baptism in its relationship to salvation. Does baptism in and of itself have magical power to save an individual apart from faith? Once more, is baptism to be interpreted as a work whereby one earns his or her salvation? Or is baptism a means whereby one responds to salvation offered through faith? Can one dispense with water baptism? Does it have any place in God's economy? These are questions that confront every devout Christian. One seeks to have balance in his or her understanding of this ceremony

commanded by God.

There appears to be a tendency within the Christian community to defame, or discredit, water baptism. One can take it or leave it, so it seems to many! But is this Biblical? Is baptism ordained of God? In other words, Is baptism commanded by God for believers? Are the chief doctrines of Christianity contained in the theology of baptism? What is the significance of baptism in the Christian economy?

Before one embarks upon the question: "Baptism: Symbol or Sacrament?", a word of caution is needed concerning our phraseology about baptism being God's plan of salvation. Christians talk of God's plan of salvation; but what do believers mean by this phrase? The "plan of salvation" is identified with: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized. But is this God's plan of salvation? Or are these the means whereby one responds to God's "plan of salvation," which is Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "I am the way." God sent Jesus in order to redeem man from His wrath. Salvation is IN and THROUGH Jesus Christ.

BAPTISM AS SYMBOL

When one confronts Pauline teaching on baptism, one is confronted with a whole range of ideas of a most complex subject. For example, Paul informs the Colossians that in Christ everyone is a "new self" (3:10); in other words, in Christ there is neither "Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (3:11). All this is expressed as having "put on the new self" (3:10). How does one become united with Christ wherein the divisions of our race are obliterated? This, according to Paul, occurs when one is "Buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (2:12). Within the *ekklesia* (church) of God, the divisions of our race are wiped out, the work of Christ for all men become visible and effective, for to be "in Christ" is to be in the church. Into all of this a man steps as he puts his faith in Christ and is baptized: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-27). These ideas and presuppositions are expressed graphically in Colossians 3:10ff.

Jesus has become the Initiator of a new race of men who know the power of redemption. For Paul the doctrine of salvation is as Christ-centered as his doctrine of the *ekklesia*, and both come to spotlight in water baptism. In other words, baptism directs the gaze of the man or woman being baptized, as well as those who observe his/her baptism, to Him who died and rose for all men: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." (Romans 6:3-5).

Baptism was ordained by the Lord for all Christians, just as the Christian experience of life in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit was intended for all believers: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). This command on the part of Peter was in response to the words of Jesus as recorded by Matthew: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit" (28:19).

Many today deny the importance of baptism as a means for the transmission of grace, that is, forgiveness of sins, reception of the Holy Spirit, induction into the body of Christ, etc.; thus, many insist on ONLY viewing baptism as a beautiful and expressive symbol of certain basic facts in the redemptive mission of our Lord, but, at the same time, deny any efficacy or grace imparted to the respondent. Therefore, a key term employed by many believers is simply "representation." In other words, to many, baptism is nothing more than a picture, a witness, a sign of the salvation established by the Lord. Yes, it is this, but more.

SACRAMENT

Another side of the coin is baptism as a sacrament. Yet this aspect of baptism may also be corrupted. It is wrong to look upon baptism as a "miracle working rite" (sacramentalism). Baptism is not a human manipulation, a secret procedure through which a man or woman may appropriate something hard to obtain. It is not a heathen rite in which one engages in order to control his gods. No, in Christian baptism, the blessings of salvation mediated through it are bestowed by God. It is in response to God as Creator for His great love where with He loved us that one is submissive to the ordinance of baptism. In other words, baptism should never be viewed as a "magical rite"; that is, baptismal regeneration. It is both symbol and sacrament.

When one approaches the symbolic nature of baptism and its sacramental nature, one has the tendency to go to extremes. For example, when the symbolic nature of baptism is stressed, the tendency is to look upon baptism as a useless addition that supplies nothing important. In other words, it is superfluous, no real value. Though many abuse baptism as commanded by Jesus, one must never forget the symbolic element in baptism. For in the symbolic element of baptism, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is easily grasped and should be safeguarded rather than minimized. Immersion is much clearer in this symbolic act than the act of pouring or sprinkling.

One of the most obvious elements in baptismal symbolism is the cleansing of sin: "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" ([Acts 22:16](#)). Second, the sinking of the baptized beneath water and rising again is an appropriate symbolism of our union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection ([Rom. 6:3-5](#)). This act of baptism represents it vividly!

One cannot deny that the Holy Spirit associates gifts, effects, blessing, and associations with baptism. Consider the following: (1) forgiveness of sins associated with baptism on Pentecost [[Acts 2:38](#)]; (2) Ananias expresses the same thing in terms to Paul about baptism [[22:16](#)]; (3) baptism and union of Christ are combined in Galatians ["for" indicates how these men of faith came to be in Christ {[3:26](#)}] [[3:26ff](#)]; (3) in baptism, one is buried and raised with Christ [[Col. 2:12](#)]; (4) in baptism, union with Christ and release from the power and guilt of sin and the sharing in the risen life of the redeemer are drawn out [[Rom. 6:1-11](#)]; (5) in baptism, the possession of the Holy Spirit is granted [[Acts 2:38](#)]; (6) baptism and washing of the new beginning are combined by Paul [[Titus 3:5](#)].

This last quote ([Titus 3:5](#)) deserves special attention: "Not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal

by the Holy Spirit." Salvation is characterized by the "rebirth" (new beginning) and "renewal" which the Holy Spirit effects. In other words, water cannot give the "new beginning" with God; only the Holy Spirit can produce that, but the context of his operation is here stated to be baptism (see also [John 3:5](#) and [I Cor. 12:13](#)).

Membership within the Christian community (church) is associated with baptism: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" ([I Cor. 12:13](#)). This Scripture is of significance in that it implies that to be baptized in water is to be baptized in the Spirit. Inheritance of the Kingdom of God is identified with baptism: "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit'" ([Jn.3:5](#)). By the time that John wrote this account of Jesus and his activities, it had become axiomatic in the *ekklesia* that baptism in water and the gift of the Spirit were combined in a single experience ([Acts 2:38](#)). In Paul's first letter to Corinth, he associates baptism, sanctification (consecration), and justification: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" ([I Cor 6:11](#)), presumably in consequence of their baptism.

We conclude this list by recalling the importance of the baptismal text in [First Peter 3:21](#): "This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." It should be observed that the operative factor in all of this is the "resurrection of Jesus Christ," not water. The water of baptism saves nobody. The baptism that saves is one in which the baptized declares his response to God's approach to him through the Gospel of Christ: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith ." ([Rm. 1:17](#)).

Baptism is a spiritual act, and this is why Peter is so anxious to correct any possible misapprehension of it. Peter would have concurred with Paul: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" ([Eph. 2:8-9](#)).

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above study, I am compelled to conclude that the understanding of baptism as "a beautiful and expressive symbol," and nothing more, is irreconcilable with the New Testament. Also for one to understand baptism only as a sacrament, that is, as a magic formula for the forgiveness of sins apart from the atonement is also wrong. Baptism embodies the saving acts of God in Christ and the response of the person submitting in baptism to that Gospel. The proclamation of the Good News and the hearing of faith are united in a single action, namely, baptism.

ENDNOTES

[\[1\]](#) All Scripture citations are from the NIV, unless stated otherwise.

[\[2\]](#) This is why baptism is spoken of as a sacrament. Even though the word sacrament is employed in this essay, it is not to be interpreted as a sacrament in the normal sense of the term as utilized by the Catholic Church.